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ASK THE EXPERTS

Studio Craft: Drawing on Non-Permanent Papers



Ask the Expert: “I’m in my first year of art school, and I’ve decided that my favorite drawing papers are newsprint, paper bags and construction paper. I’ve done some of my best work on these, I’ve loved them since I was little, and my professor is worried that these drawings aren’t going to last very long. Are they really that much worse than other types of paper?”

A: It’s a sad fact that some materials that artists love to use simply aren’t up to the standards of permanence required for professional work. That doesn’t make them inferior for their intended uses- scholastic projects, temporary mockups and displays, decorations, packaging- but because some kinds of paper are made primarily for temporary use, it shouldn’t be assumed that they can also last the test of time.

Acidity is a major cause of paper deterioration, and some cheaper papers favored in primary school are manufactured through processes that fail to remove acidic components. Some scholastic-grade papers are more durable than others, however. Many classrooms today use types of paper which are buffered to reduce acidity. Newsprint, construction paper, “oak tag”, and

Manila Paper which are common in schools are usually made of wood fiber or recycled paper pulp processed chemically in a way that leaves lignin intact, which eventually causes yellowing and embrittlement. (Some of these papers were not always made of wood, as the names “oak tag” and Manila suggest- the latter possibly having been made from hemp “oakum” and the latter from abaca- but these are now almost exclusively made from wood or recycled pulp).



Brown kraft paper bag

Drawings on kraft paper may fare better over time than the ones done on newsprint, as the kraft process removes lignin and yields a stronger fiber. Other utility papers adapted for art like butcher rolls, wallpaper liner and seamless backdrop may also prove somewhat more durable than newsprint as they age, but because these are not made for permanent art, this may not be certain. Also, the dyes used to impart color to construction and backdrop paper generally are not fade-resistant or lightfast to the standards we expect from artist’s papers.

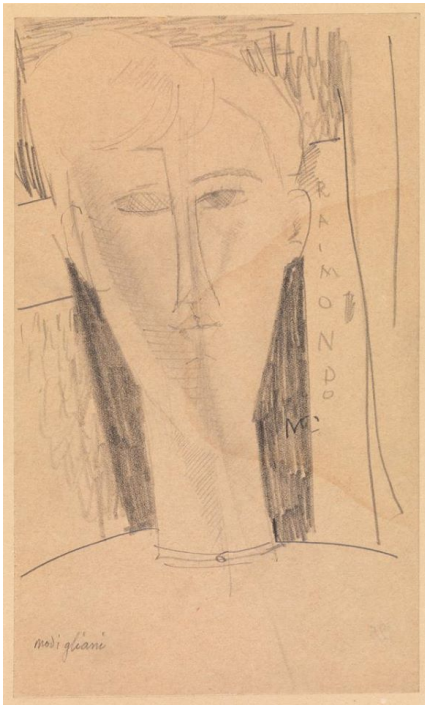


Image: Amedeo Modigliani. Raimondo, 1915. Graphite on newsprint

Even experienced professional artists do use temporary papers in the studio. Newsprint continues to be favored for “warm up” sketches and other work not intended for release to collectors. Artists today generally place a high priority on lasting results, however, and many will only work on durable papers, even for sketches, to preserve as much finished work as possible. Acid-free sulphite paper is close to the price of newsprint and, while not equal in quality to 100% cotton stock, is more durable than newsprint. Kraft paper is also available in acid-free rolls, offering the look and feel of paper bag stock, with the dimensions and flat surface of better artist’s paper.